

Miscellaneous Notes

1. TIGERS AND PORCUPINES

I used to wonder in my young days why a tiger, being such an intelligent and cautious animal, should kill a porcupine when other natural food was available. After many occasions for observation in the jungles by following tigers with a pair of binoculars from a safe distance, I am inclined to believe that the porcupine attracts the attention of the tiger due to the tastiness of its meat. For the tiger the porcupine is a toothsome morsel, and in spite of the protection afforded it by the pointed spines and quills the tiger does not hesitate to face the dangers involved. I have myself seen the peculiar way in which the tiger goes about to kill a porcupine. After his victim has been approached to a convenient distance, the tiger with a powerful stroke tosses the porcupine in the air and may give another blow if necessary. The porcupine usually hits a stone or some other hard object becoming unconscious and exposing its vital parts.

In the process of attacking its prey in this manner accidents are likely to happen. For example, small quills may get lodged in the tiger's pads while striking the animal which may be very difficult to extract by means of his teeth. Subsequently these may penetrate deeper into the festering wound and disable him in time.

Another likely place for wounds from a porcupine's quills is the mouth, or even the intestine. On many occasions I have found small quills in a tiger's droppings which had passed through the alimentary canal. All the same, there is a danger of some pieces of quills sticking in the intestines and causing ulcers. In fact, one such tiger was found dead on the banks of Shikarghar Tank, near Banbihar Sanctuary in 1943, in a skin and bone condition. The intestine of this animal had several ulcers in a festering state inside which pieces of porcupine quills were found. Another example of disability due to porcupine spines was that of a tigress destroyed by us in Dholpur on 5th May, 1945. For some days complaints were being received from an adjoining village about a tigress killing cattle at the rate of four or five animals a day. The peculiarity of these kills was that only the soft parts such as udder, testes, etc. were eaten and the rest of the carcass left untouched. Things came to a head when the tigress attacked a 10 year old boy from a field hutment of Maharajpura village, adjoining the Ramsagar Sanctuary. A hunt was organised and the tigress eventually traced and destroyed. Examination showed

that the mouth of the animal was in a diseased condition with large ulcers forming on the lower jaw. On cleaning and removing the flesh from the affected part I found a growth of deformity of the bone around the molars on the right hand part of the jaw with a piece of porcupine quill stuck inside. In this diseased condition the tigress was unable to hunt her natural prey and had no other recourse but to seek easier prey in cattle and men. This is a good example proving that porcupine quills may be responsible for turning a tiger into a man-eater.

Porcupines, it seems to me, are a potential source of danger to tigers and possibly also to other carnivorous animals in wild life sanctuaries. They are harmful likewise to the vegetation and trees, the roots of which are a part of their regular diet. There is definitely a case for the collection of more data regarding the ecology of porcupines with a view to determining whether, and to what extent, their elimination from wild life sanctuaries is desirable.

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[The specimen was sent to the Bombay Veterinary College and we have received a note from the Principal which reads:

'The specimen sent by you consists of the lower jaw-bone (mandible) of a tiger. In the region of the molars on the right side, an irregularly spherical swelling has formed on the bone. It has a rough porous surface and a cavity on the inside. The cavitation has extended to the last molar posteriorly involving half of its root, and the first molar anteriorly involving the posterior half of its root. The second molar is absent in the specimen and must have dropped out owing to the destruction of the bone which held it in place.

'The nature of the lesion indicates that it was produced by suppurative osteitis caused by a wound and its subsequent infection. The wound might have been caused by any pointed object such as a porcupine quill as suggested.

'In suppurative osteitis there is a destruction of the bony tissue in the infection, resulting in its rarefaction. New bone may form under the periosteum which is not involved in the inflammatory process. Due to the rarefaction of the bone in the region, the